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Honors, Honor Codes, and Academic Integrity: Where Do They Converge and Diverge?

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Academic integrity has become a topic of increasing concern to faculty and administrators in colleges and universities across the country (Davis, Seeman, Chapman, & Rotstein, 2008; McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2002). Indeed, the level of concern has led to the development of highly articulated academic integrity procedures at a number of institutions of higher learning. In some instances, schools have felt the need to develop honor pledges and oaths, such as the honor oath recited voluntarily by graduate students entering the Institute of Medical Science at the University of Toronto (Davis et al., 2008).

Concern about academic integrity is not, of course, new. The University of Virginia, where I did my graduate work, has an honor code that dates back to 1840 when, as legend goes, a masked student shot a faculty member. This event led to the establishment of the nation's oldest student-run honor system in which students pledge not to lie, cheat, or steal while attending the University of Virginia. Students, not faculty, are responsible for monitoring and prosecuting their peers who fail to live up to this pledge (University of Virginia, 2008). The University of Virginia honor policy has its benefits, such as the ability to use a university identification card to cash checks (failure to honor one's checks is an honor offense). However, many view the single sanction for an honor offense—expulsion from the university—as an excessive penalty. (N.B. At my orientation we were told that lying to purchase alcohol or to gain sexual favors was not a violation of the honor system. To date I remain uncertain whether this stance reflected original intent or was a liberal interpretation of the policy.) The University of Virginia model is by no means the dominant one in American colleges and universities; responsibility for enforcement and penalties for violations vary widely both across and within academic institutions. Nonetheless, the goal of all such systems appears to be the reduction of instances of student dishonesty.

Increasingly, faculty members at colleges and universities across the country have become concerned about violations of academic integrity, particularly with regard to plagiarism by students. The fact that this concern is fairly widespread may account for the success of resources that allow faculty to check the work of their students for plagiarism. Internet businesses such as Turnitin.com (iParadigms, 2008) have been successful because faculty have been able to persuade their institutions to expend institutional funds to reduce the incidence of student plagiarism and other forms of cheating associated with the online availability of both legitimate intellectual material and illegitimate sources of term papers and other academic work. According to iParadigms' (2008) promotional brochure, Turnitin.com allows faculty to check students' papers against a large database of student papers and Internet sites; the company claims that Turnitin.com is used by over 7,000 institutions in over 90 countries. The success of iParadigms' business model and the widespread adoption of Turnitin.com and other similar services are diagnostic, perhaps, of the concern both faculty and institutions of higher learning have about academic integrity and the enforcement of anti-plagiarism efforts.

Questions have arisen about the source of an apparent increase in student plagiarism. One possibility, frequently asserted with great confidence, is that the availability of online sources of information undermines students' abilities to recognize that they are using the work of others inappropriately. My own anecdotal experience is that students are increasingly unaware of the differences between material appearing online in academic journals and in blogs and or sources like Wikipedia. Nonetheless, I have not seen any convincing empirical research indicating that students' apparent inability to distinguish their own words and thoughts from the words and thoughts of others (which we so casually label as plagiarism) is the result of the availability of online information sources. I would be interested in research—quantitative, qualitative, or anecdotal—that could establish a link between plagiarism and the Internet. It seems entirely possible that the availability of electronic and other tools (such as Turnitin.com) has simply allowed us to identify instances of intellectual dishonesty that we could not have detected in the past.

As increasing numbers of faculty require their students to submit their academic work electronically in order to facilitate checking student work against electronic databases, complaints have begun to arise. As student access to computers has become ubiquitous, students have lost the excuse that they are unable to comply with electronic submission requirements, but some now question whether their rights to copyright their work are violated by its inclusion in databases such as Turnitin.com Other students feel offended because the use of electronic databases seems to assume that students are guilty of plagiarism. One of my students recently voiced another provocative

complaint, asserting that she could not be compelled to turn in work electronically as that would violate her constitutional rights protecting against self-incrimination. Still others have complained that the use of electronic databases is the intellectual equivalent of racial profiling: the ever vigilant professor, like the overzealous police officer, assumes guilt in a segment of the population, in this case students, who are subjected to in-depth examination on the assumption that guilt may be established if only we search diligently.

An issue of particular concern to honors educators is the conflation of honor systems/codes with honors programs/colleges. In the minds of some students, parents, and faculty, students enrolled in honors programs or honors colleges should be especially cognizant of issues of academic integrity and can be expected to adhere to higher standards of ethical rigor than non-honors students. The implicit assumption is that non-honors students, as a result of their lesser intellectual development, may be excused for their ignorance of academic standards of integrity whereas honors students, by virtue of their intellectual talents, should be held to a higher ethical standard. Such an interpretation might be consistent with Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development, in which higher levels of moral judgment are associated with more advanced levels of cognitive development (e.g., Kohlberg & Armon, 1984); however, Kohlberg himself asserted that more advanced levels of thinking about moral issues are not necessarily correlated with moral behavior. While I would argue that we should not confuse the academic excellence of honors education with the moral excellence of honorable behavior, I believe with equal conviction that we should encourage our students to behave with integrity in their intellectual and other pursuits regardless of the pressures they may feel to achieve excellence. Accomplishments of any sort are cheapened if they are achieved through dishonesty.

Stanlick (2006) has argued that the intellectual accomplishments signaled by participation in honors programs and honorable behavior (i.e., academic integrity) are intertwined, not merely conflated. She argues that the honor code at the University of Central Florida's Burnett Honors College is a defining element of its community. Full participation in this honors community requires the internalization of the set of principles of academic integrity under which the community operates. Individual commitment to these shared underlying principles is essential to the well-functioning community and the well-functioning individual. In Stanlick's view, "the honors student must, as a full and participating member of an honors community, internalize and exemplify honor as a way of life that maintains her real status in an honors community" (p. 90).

Anecdotally, others have argued that honors students face special pressures that may lead them to engage in behavior that exhibits less academic integrity than is seen among non-honors students. The pressures of maintaining high grade point averages in courses that are more challenging than those taken by their non-honors peers, the argument goes, lead students to feel that shortcuts, including plagiarism, are justified. Other students may violate elements of an institution's code of student conduct in pursuit of apparently lofty academic goals. At Syracuse University, for example, we had an honors student who violated the university's computing policies by creating software designed to undermine the campus's computer-security system. This behavior came to our attention in the Honors Program as the student was using this program as a major element of his honors thesis project. Neither of his faculty advisors, who had reviewed his thesis and given it the requisite final approval, were concerned that violation of university policy was at the heart of this student's capstone experience. Both faculty and the student expressed the opinion that the behavior was justified as a means of developing the student's programming skills since the thesis presented samples of several unsuccessful attempts the student made before ultimately breaking through the institutional security barrier. As administrators of the Honors Program, we took a different view and refused to allow the student to submit work that violated institutional policies. Although the thesis demonstrated intellectual growth and development, it also clearly demonstrated that the student was willfully attempting to violate the institution's security, a fact discussed in the text of the thesis, and it celebrated the student's success in finally doing so. Although my experience indicates that honors students generally recognize that such means-ends justification is morally ambiguous at best, students and faculty may advance such justifications in pursuit of intellectual goals.

Of course, student plagiarism is only one component of academic integrity. Faculty and others may also engage in plagiarism. Indeed, the Dutch publisher Elsevier has announced that it will use a database called CrossCheck (developed with iParadigms and Crossref) to examine journal submissions for originality (Foster, 2008). Like Turnitin.com, CrossCheck will compare submissions against a database of published articles to assure the originality of submitted material. Elsevier indicates that the use of CrossCheck will assist scholars by insuring that the resulting publications are not plagiarized.

A related issue, the falsification of data and research findings, is also an issue of concern to academics and other intellectuals. Preventing the falsification of data and of conclusions from research efforts motivated the pledge taken by students at the University of Toronto to represent their research accurately and honestly (Davis et al., 2008). Although faculty and administrators may feel it necessary to insist that students take such oaths to assure

intellectual honesty and integrity, students are not the only ones who may falsify or exaggerate their data.

A tragic case in point is illustrated in Calapinto's (2000) discussion of the case of Bruce Thiessen, one of a pair of twins who lost his penis in what was later described as a " bizarre accident" that occurred during his circumcision to correct his phimosis (a clinical condition in which the male foreskin does not retract as it should). The child and his parents were referred to Dr. John Money at the Johns Hopkins University. Beginning in 1972 (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972) and for decades afterwards, Dr. Money described this case as a successful example of how the biological influences on gender development (nature) could be overcome by rearing the child as a member of the other sex. He made these assertions despite the fact that Bruce (now Brenda) was resistant to Money's therapeutic efforts to get the child to identify with the new surgically and hormonally induced sex and the characteristics stereotypically associated with it. According to Calapinto (2000), Brenda's physicians and therapists were puzzled by the fact that they were unsuccessful in getting Brenda to adjust to "her" assigned gender role while Money was reporting unconditional success in another case with nearly identical characteristics. What they did not realize was that Money was not being entirely honest in his reports of success with his other patient (actually Brenda). Although it may not be the case, as Calapinto alleges, that Money's treatment of Bruce/Brenda was the cause of his/her unhappiness and eventual suicide, it is clear that his misrepresentation of the facts of the case led to many of us (myself included) teaching numerous students inaccurate information about the malleability of gender and gender roles.

I would not be the first to argue that intellectual integrity is the only currency academics possess, a fact that may account for reluctance to acknowledge intellectual dishonesty when it occurs. And, of course, academic communities are not the only place where integrity and honesty are important for establishing trust in both individuals and institutions (e.g., Lappe & Marshall, 2004). I would assert, however, that our reluctance to insist on academic integrity in both our students and our colleagues diminishes our claim to intellectual rigor and the value we can offer to society at large. I concur with Stanlick's (2006) argument that intellectual honesty is essential to the functioning of honors communities and of intellectual communities in general.

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